

OPPORTUNISTIC HUNTING OF A MARSH HAWK ON A BOMBING RANGE

by

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On 25 February 1977 we visited a U.S. Navy bombing range in Noxubee County, Mississippi, during bombing practice by Navy TA-4 jets. The range, which is 1 mile long and 3000 feet wide, was once pine forest, but in 1973 the forest was cut and debris from the harvest piled into windrows. Much of the cleared area now has a cover dominated by *Andropogon*. A series of concentric circles formed by old tires form a target in the center of the range. The range is surrounded by pine forest.

During bombing runs, from approximately 0945 to 1015 and 1245 to 1315, we observed a female Marsh Hawk (*Circus cyaneus*) hunting within the target range and specifically near the target site. During each bombing run approximately one jet per minute bombed the target with a 25-pound practice bomb from an altitude of approximately 1800 feet above the ground. The practice bombs exploded with a noise which seemed to us about as loud as a 12-gauge shotgun, gave a brief flash, and released a trail of smoke which allowed observers to measure the accuracy of the pilots. The greatest noise associated with the activity was from the jets. We measured this from approximately 1500 feet to the side of the target and found it to vary between 80 and 87 decibels. Throughout the bombing the Marsh Hawk continued hunting from a height of 15-20 feet—even when a bomb exploded within 200 feet. Between the bombing runs the Marsh Hawk hunted over a larger area of the range, but during the bombing her activities seemed to be focused more on the target area.

On at least one occasion she dropped to the ground out of our sight and may have been successful at prey capture. On another occasion she made an unsuccessful attack on a small bird. We feel that this Marsh Hawk was taking small mammals and possibly birds that were flushed from cover by the bombing. Navy personnel indicated that the bombing range may be used for similar practice up to 6 days per week. This Marsh Hawk had certainly become acclimated to the loud and unusual human activities in the area.

We acknowledge and appreciate the hospitality of the Navy during our visit.